

The weight of what we want

est

The skytrain rattles beneath my feet as I make my way home, and I can't stop touching my lips. It's embarrassing. I'm twenty-four years old, standing in a fluorescent-lit train car at nearly midnight, surrounded by drunk salarymen and tired nurses, and I'm touching my mouth like a teenager who just had their first kiss. Except it wasn't my first kiss. Not even close. But it felt like it might have been the first one that mattered.

William isn't like the others. William is...

The thought slithers in uninvited. One kiss—okay, several kisses—doesn't mean having someone. It means potential. It means possibility. It means maybe.

He sees me. And I see him. And maybe that's enough. Maybe that's everything.

The click of my own door lock echoed, a dull thud compared to the rapid beat of my heart. I leaned against the cool metal, a smile stretching across his face, too wide for the empty hallway. William's scent, a mix of old paper and something citrusy, still clung to his clothes, a phantom warmth against his skin. This date, this meeting, had shattered every expectation. He'd braced for awkward silences, for William's famed reclusiveness to manifest as a wall he couldn't scale. Instead, he'd found an ocean of quiet depth, a vulnerability that drew him in, a kiss that had left him breathless.

My apartment feels smaller than usual. Cramped and dim after William's penthouse with its floor-to-ceiling windows and expensive silence. I drop my camera bag by the door, kick off my shoes, and collapse onto my single bed. The date—was it officially a date? Yes, definitely a date—plays on repeat in my head.

William's hands shaking slightly as he made tea. The way he'd looked at me when I said I'd seen him from the beginning. The portrait of me in his studio, raw and unfinished and seen. His mouth on mine, tentative at first, then sure.

He peeled off his shoes, dropping them with a soft thump. Fool. He'd spent days, weeks, dissecting every text, every hesitant word, convinced William would bolt, that he was too damaged, too much. But the man in the apartment, the one whose lips had tasted like jasmine tea and nervous energy, had been anything but. He was a puzzle, yes, but one Est wanted to solve, piece by beautiful, intricate piece.

I'm grinning at my ceiling like an idiot.

All that overthinking. All that spiral with Tui about whether it was a date or not, whether to wear the blue shirt or the black, whether bringing tarts made me look desperate or thoughtful. None of it mattered.

William had wanted me there. William had kissed me. William had asked when he could see me again, and the answer is whenever he wants but I managed to play it cooler than that.

Not just good. Not just “it went okay.” Better.

So much better it feels dangerous.

I was a fool for overthinking it.

All week I’d spun myself into knots:

Is it a date?

Is it not?

Will he panic?

Will I say something stupid?

And then tonight happened and none of it mattered.

My mind is already racing ahead, planning things we could do together. Which is presumptuous and probably jinxing everything, but I can't help it.

He pictured William in his own apartment, maybe painting, maybe watching an old film. He pictured them together, not just in William’s cocoon, but out here, under these very lights. A street food stall, the scent of grilled meat and sticky rice filling the air. A quiet corner in a gallery, William explaining the nuances of a brushstroke. He pictured Tui, his best friend, laughing with William, their shared artistic passions sparking an instant connection. The thought made a warmth bloom in his chest.

Then, a flicker of something colder.

Lego.

He saw it again, William’s dismissive wave, the casual “I’m busy right now. Can we reschedule?” Lego’s bright, hurt eyes, the way their smile had faltered, the forced cheer in their voice.

“Well, it was really nice to meet you, P’Est. I hope you two have fun.”

The words, meant to be polite, had carried a tremor of something deeper, Trying to make himself small, to disappear, because his best friend, the one person he seemingly orbited, had brushed him aside for a new attraction.

He ran a hand through his hair. He wouldn't treat Tui like that. Never. Tui, who’d been there through every eviction, every broken dream, every ramen-for-dinner night. Tui, who was family. The thought of ever making Tui feel like an

inconvenience, a discarded toy, twisted his gut. William's dismissal, born of a nervous excitement, maybe, but a dismissal nonetheless. It felt... wrong. He'd remained silent, watching the scene unfold, caught in the intoxicating pull of William's presence, the promise of something new. He should have said something. Offered a kind word to Lego. Acknowledged their presence.

He sighed, the sound loud in the silent room. He should have.

If someone treated Tui that way...

If I started dating someone and suddenly Tui became an inconvenience, someone to be scheduled around instead of scheduled with...I'd hate myself. But I hadn't said anything. I'd just sat there, complicit in my silence, letting William send away the person who'd kept him alive for three years because William wanted to be alone with me.

It felt good in the moment. Like winning. Like being chosen.

Now it just feels hollow.

The way he didn't introduce me properly, just "Est, this is Lego." The way he said "Can we reschedule?" like Lego was a dentist appointment. The way Lego's flowers sat on the counter like an afterthought.

And my own silence. My complicity. The way I'd sat there, secretly pleased to be chosen, to be the one William wanted to keep while sending Lego away.

Sleep felt like a distant country. His mind replayed the date, the kiss, then shifted to tomorrow's schedule: an early morning product shoot, followed by an afternoon editing session at the studio. Distractions. He needed distractions. He closed his eyes, William's face, soft and hesitant, still burned behind his eyelids. He pushed it away, focusing on camera settings, on exposure, on the sharp edges of his next job. Anything but the unsettling image of Lego's retreating back.

I stayed silent.

I watched the whole thing happen and I didn't say anything.

I should have said something.

But I didn't.

I let William push them away because I was greedy for more time with him. I let Lego leave thinking they were an interruption instead of a cornerstone. I would never want Tui to be treated that way. I would tear the world apart if someone made Tui feel like an afterthought, like someone who could be rescheduled.

And I just... watched.

I roll onto my side, hug a pillow to my chest, and try to push the thought away.

Tomorrow. I'll fix it tomorrow. I'll do better.

For now, I let exhaustion win.

I fall asleep thinking about deadlines, about the next job, about lighting setups and file exports—anything to keep the guilt at bay. But even in dreams, I see Lego walking away with sunflowers in their arms, and I still don't speak.

The next day - Ink & Ashes

The studio smells like coffee and the sharp tang of fresh ink when I push through the door at 2 PM. Tui is bent over a client's shoulder, the tattoo machine buzzing steadily. He glances up, catches my eye, and grins.

"You survived!" he mouths silently.

The client—a middle-aged woman getting a lotus on her shoulder blade—is deep in conversation about her daughter's wedding, so I just give him a thumbs up and settle at the desk in the corner.

The studio hummed with a quiet energy. The scent of antiseptic and ink hung in the air, a familiar comfort. I sat hunched over his laptop, the glowing screen a barrier between him and the outside world, editing raw images from his shoot. He'd chosen a corner desk, close enough to Tui's station to feel connected, far enough to avoid disturbing the precise work of a tattoo. The low buzz of Tui's machine provided a steady rhythm, a counterpoint to the click of his mouse.

He stole a glance at Tui. His friend was a picture of intense focus, brow furrowed, hand steady as he etched delicate lines onto a client's arm. Tui's brown hair, usually a wild tangle, was pulled back in a loose bun, a few strands escaping to frame his concentration. He loved watching Tui work. There was a quiet reverence in his movements, a dedication that mirrored his own passion for photography.

The client shifted, a soft murmur of discomfort. Tui paused, his voice a low, soothing rumble.

Est turned back to his screen, but really I'm just moving sliders around randomly, too distracted to focus. His thoughts drifted. William. The way William's hand had felt in his, cool and a little shaky. The way his eyes, dark and expressive, had met his across the coffee table. The kiss. A jolt of heat ran through him. It was real. It wasn't a dream.

Finally, the buzz of the machine stopped. Tui straightened, stretching his back with a groan. The client, smiled, thanking him profusely.

"Okay, you're all done!" Tui's voice breaks through my daydream. "Remember, keep it clean and moisturized. No swimming for two weeks." Tui's voice was warm, his smile genuine.

The woman thanks him profusely, leaves a generous tip, and heads out. The bell above the door chimes as she leaves. Tui stripped off his gloves, dropping them into the biohazard bin, then wiped down his station with practiced efficiency. He caught Est's eye, a mischievous glint there.

"Well, look who decided to grace us with his presence. I thought you'd be too busy swooning."

Est rolled his eyes, a genuine smile finally breaking through. "Oh, I'm swooning. Just quietly." He closed his laptop, leaning back in his chair. "Client just left?"

Tui nodded, wiping his hands on a towel. "Yeah. Floral piece. Turned out nice. What about you? Still riding that high?" He walked over, perched on the edge of Est's desk, a comfortable weight.

"Higher than a kite." Est's voice was softer than he intended. "It was... more."

Tui's gaze sharpened, a silent invitation to elaborate.

"He's... different. Not what I expected at all."

"Oh? What did you expect, Mr. Photographer-to-the-stars?" Tui nudged his knee playfully.

"A mess. An anxious wreck. Someone who'd bolt at the first sign of human contact." Est laughed, a light, disbelieving sound. "Instead, he was... captivating. And he kissed me, Tui."

Tui's eyebrows shot up. "He kissed you?" His voice was carefully neutral, but his eyes held a flicker of surprise, quickly masked.

"Yeah. Right before I left. It was..." Est searched for the right word, something beyond cliché. "Inevitable. Like it was always going to happen."

"Inevitable, huh? That's quite the word." Tui's fingers tapped a rhythm on the desk. "So, he's not just a pretty face, then?"

"He's more than a pretty face. He's... kind. And smart. And his apartment is like a museum of his soul, Tui. Paintings everywhere. And he makes the best jasmine tea I've ever tasted." Est felt the words tumble out, a dam breaking. He wanted to tell Tui everything, magnify every perfect detail, every soft glance, every shared laugh. He wanted to bask in the glow of it all, to solidify it by speaking it aloud. "We talked for hours. About art, about life, about... everything. He's got this quiet strength. You'd like him."

Tui hummed, a low sound in his throat. "Sounds like you're smitten."

"Beyond smitten. I'm... I don't know. I feel like I just stepped into a different world. A better one." Est leaned forward, a conspiratorial glint in his eye. "I even started thinking about what we'd do together. Introducing him to you, going out, actual dates. Not just holed up in his apartment."

Tui's smile was gentle, a little too knowing. "That's big, Est. Really big. You usually take a while to get there."

"I know." Est sighed, the earlier uneasiness resurfacing. "But then... there was Lego."

Tui's fingers stilled on the desk. "Lego?"

"Yeah. William's friend. The one who brings him flowers every Wednesday." Est paused, choosing his words carefully. He didn't want to sound judgmental, but the memory still pricked him. "He showed up And William... he just kind of brushed him off. Told him he was busy. Didn't even really look at him."

Tui's expression remained unreadable, but a subtle tension entered his posture. "Oh."

"It just... it felt wrong, Tui. Lego looked so... small. Like he was trying to disappear. And I thought, I would never want someone to treat you like that. Ever." Est looked at his friend, his gaze earnest. "You're my best friend. You're family. And to see someone treat their friend like an inconvenience... it made me uncomfortable."

Tui's eyes, usually so open, held a guarded quality. "People make mistakes, Est. Especially when they're nervous. Or excited. Or... figuring things out."

"I know." Est ran a hand over his face. "I just don't sit right with that."

"You're a good guy, Est. You always see the best in people, even when they don't deserve it." Tui's voice was soft, almost a whisper. He shifted, picking up a stray tattoo needle from his tray, turning it over in his fingers. "So, what now? You gonna abandon this William because of one misstep?"

"No. Of course not." Est shook his head, a fierce protectiveness rising in him. "It's just... a warning sign. A yellow flag. I want to understand him. But I also... I don't want to ignore it. I want to make sure he's not like that with everyone. Or with me, eventually."

Tui's expression softens. "Oh, Est. You're done for."

"Completely." I agree, unable to stop smiling. "He's... God, Tui, he's amazing. He's brilliant and broken and trying so hard to piece himself back together. And when he looks at me, I feel like... like I'm worth looking at."

"You are worth looking at." Tui says firmly.

"And he painted me. But like, the version of me I see in my own head at 3 AM when I can't sleep."

Tui whistles low. "That's... intense."

"Everything about him is intense." I lean back in the chair.

But Tui knows something. I can see it in the way his eyes flicker, the way he opens his mouth and then closes it again.

"Fair enough." Tui finally met my gaze, a hint of something unsaid lingering in his eyes. "It's good you're seeing these things. Means you're not just blindly falling."

"I'm trying not to." Est leaned back, a small smile playing on his lips. "But it's hard. He's... he's everything I didn't know I was looking for."

"Well, good for you, then." Tui stood, stretching again. "Now, if you're done gushing, I've got some sketches to finish. And you've got... whatever it is you do on that magic box." He gestured to Est's laptop.

Est laughed, a genuine, unburdened sound. "Magic box it is." He watched Tui walk back to his station, the slight sway of his hips, the easy confidence in his stride. Tui was a rock, a constant. And Est loved him for it.

I opened his laptop again, but his focus was fractured. William, the kiss, The joy and the unease tangled together, a complex knot. He worked through a few more images, adjusting colors, cropping frames, trying to lose myself in the familiar rhythm of his craft.

The studio door chimed, announcing a new arrival. Hong, silver hair gleaming under the fluorescent lights, He's wearing paint-splattered jeans and a vintage band tee, walked in, a small bag clutched in his hand. He moved with a quiet grace, his presence almost a whisper.

"Morning, everyone." Hong's voice was soft. He made his way to his own station, setting down his bag.

"Evening, Hong." Tui greeted him warmly.

"I brought food," he announces. "They gave me extra because the auntie thinks I'm too skinny."

"The auntie thinks everyone is too skinny." Tui laughs, but he's already reaching for the bags. "What did you get?"

"Papaya salad, sticky rice, grilled chicken, and..." Hong pulls out another container. "mango with coconut milk because I know Est has a sweet tooth."

I blink. "You got dessert for me?"

Hong shrugs, a little shy. "Tui mentioned you were coming by. Figured you might be hungry."

There's something soft in the way Tui looks at Hong, something I haven't seen before. Like maybe I've been too wrapped up in my own drama to notice.

"Let's eat in the back." Tui suggests. "It's too nice to stay inside."

I closed his laptop, a lightness returning to my chest, good food, and the company of his friends. Exactly what he needed.

The back of the studio has a tiny courtyard that Tui's transformed into something magical—string lights, potted plants, a small table with mismatched chairs. We spread out the food, and for a moment, everything feels simple. Good.

"So.." Hong says, expertly mixing his som tam. "Est finally got his man?"

"How does everyone know about this?" I groan.

"Tui texts me," Hong says simply. "A lot. Like, constantly. It's actually concerning how much this man texts."

"You answer them all." Tui points out.

"Someone has to make sure you don't do anything stupid." Hong replies, but he's smiling.

We eat, and talk, and for the first time I really look at Hong. He's quiet but observant, making dry comments that have Tui laughing so hard he nearly chokes on sticky rice. He knows about art in a way that's unpretentious, talking about color theory while gesturing with chicken skewers.

"So, Hong." Est started, leaning forward slightly, "Tui mentioned you're studying at the university? What are you majoring in?"

Hong looked surprised, as if no one had ever asked him that before. "Drawing. Fine arts. And I have a small clothing brand. I print my illustrations on fabrics." He spoke softly, his eyes flicking from Est to Tui.

"No way!" Est's eyes lit up. "That's amazing. Tui never told me that." He shot a mock-glare at Tui.



Tui turned, a playful smirk on his face. "He's too modest, Est. Hong's got serious talent. His designs are incredible. You should see them."

"Absolutely." Est nodded. "I'm always looking for new artists. Maybe we could even collaborate sometime. I'm a photographer, you know."

"I know." Hong's smile was small, but it reached his eyes. "Tui told me."

My phone buzzes. William.

William: Miss you. Is that allowed? To miss someone you just saw?

My heart does something stupid and acrobatic.

Me: Definitely allowed. I miss you too.

William: What are you doing?

Me: Lunch with Tui and his friend Hong. Talking about art.

William: That sounds nice.

The food suddenly tasteless in his mouth. I thought about William's apartment, the paintings, the quiet intensity in his eyes. About of the kiss, the unexpected intimacy. And Lego, a silent, unwavering presence.

I want to believe that William can hold space for both of us, that love doesn't have to be exclusive, that there's room in his life for history and future both.

"You're smiling at your phone like it just told you the meaning of life." Hong observes.

"It might have." I admit.

Tui rolls his eyes but he's smiling too. "Young love. Disgusting." Hong laughs, bright and surprised.

"I want to understand him." i said, voice firm. "Really understand him. All of it."

"That's all anyone can ask for." Tui replied, his hand squeezing Est's arm gently.

The rest of lunch passed in a more subdued tone. Est found himself listening more, observing Hong's quiet gestures, Tui's comforting presence. He realized he had been so focused on the newness, the excitement of William, that he had overlooked the complex tapestry of relationships that already existed around him.

We stay there, talking about everything and nothing. About Hong's art project. About the tattoo Tui's designing for a regular client. About the cookbook author who insisted on being photographed with every single one of her spatulas. It feels good.

Normal. Like maybe we're all figuring out how to be human together. The city felt different, sharper, more layered. The weight of William's world, his fears, his past, settled on my shoulders, not as a burden, but as a challenge. He wanted to be part of that world, to help him navigate it. But he also knew he had to be careful, to tread lightly, to acknowledge the people who had been there all along.

He glanced at Tui, then at Hong, a quiet gratitude blooming in his chest. They were his constants, And he would never, ever take them for granted.

Maybe it's okay to be messy.

Maybe it's okay to want things that scare you.

Maybe it's okay to be the person who interrupts, who stumbles in at the wrong moment, who still gets to stay.

I think about William. About Lego. About the flowers on the counter. I think about how I want to do this again—sit with people who see me, who let me see them. I think about texting William later, telling him I'm thinking about him. Because maybe that's how this works. We don't replace each other. We just make the circle bigger, there's room for all of us.

When I finally leave, Hong and Tui are still there, heads bent together over Hong's sketchbook. The string lights have come on, casting everything in warm gold, and they look like a painting themselves. I think about William, alone in his apartment with his canvases and his guilt and his determination to do better. I think about Lego, hopefully surrounded by flowers and friends, healing from the hurt of being pushed aside. I think about how complicated people are, how we hurt each other without meaning to, how love isn't enough but it's a start.

I'll see William again. I'll see the mess he promised to show me. All of it.

And I'll stay because when he kisses me, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Even if we're all still figuring out what that means.